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THE TERM 'NATURALISM' IN RECENT DISCUSSION.

ONE of the results of Mr. Balfour's *Foundations of Belief* has been to bring to light some serious and even remarkable divergences of view as to the meaning and precise application of current philosophical terms. This was particularly the case in regard to the term Naturalism, which is so prominent in Mr. Balfour's argument. Much of the criticism of the book took, in fact, the form of an indignant repudiation of the author's use of names. It may perhaps, therefore, contribute to the fixing of philosophical usage in this case and in the case of some other terms frequently conjoined with it, if, starting from Mr. Balfour's definitions, we examine his usage in the light of some of the chief objections taken to it.

In his introductory chapter Mr. Balfour thus indicates the system of thought against which his book is directed: "Whatever the name selected, the thing itself is sufficiently easy to describe. For its leading doctrines are that we may know phenomena and the laws by which they are connected, but nothing more. 'More' there may or may not be, but if it exists we can never apprehend it; and whatever the World may be 'in its reality' (supposing such an expression to be otherwise than meaningless), the World for us, the World with which alone we are concerned, or of which alone we can have any cognizance, is that World which is revealed to us through perception, and which is the subject-matter of the Natural Sciences. Here, and here only, are we on firm ground. Here, and here only, can we discover anything which deserves to be described as Knowledge. Here, and here only, may we profitably exercise our reason or gather the fruits of Wisdom" (p. 7). In another passage he speaks of "the two elements composing the naturalistic creed: the one *positive*, consisting, broadly speaking, of the teaching contained in the general body of the natural

sciences ; the other *negative*, expressed in the doctrine that beyond these limits, wherever they may happen to lie, nothing is, and nothing can be, known " (p. 92) ; and again of "the assumption that the kind of 'experience' which gave us natural science was the sole basis of knowledge," and "the further inference that nothing deserved to be called Knowledge which did not come within the circle of the natural sciences" (p. 171). "After all," he says in another place, "naturalism is nothing more than the assertion that empirical methods are valid and that no others are so " (p. 134). In these passages the theory is defined by reference to its presuppositions or method ; when we look at the resulting body of doctrine, we find that the theory attempts "the impossible task of extracting reason from unreason " (p. 301). It involves the "deposition of Reason from its ancient position as the ground of all existence to that of an expedient among other expedients for the maintenance of organic life ; an expedient, moreover, which is temporary in its character and insignificant in its effects. An irrational Universe which accidentally turns out a few reasoning animals at one corner of it, as a rich man may experiment at one end of his park with some curious 'sport' accidentally produced among his flocks and herds, is a Universe which we might well despise if we did not ourselves share its degradation " (p. 75). And, finally, the naturalistic catechism which he elaborates at the conclusion of the first part of the volume clearly identifies Naturalism with consistent Materialism (pp. 83-5).

To the system whose substantive doctrines he thus indicates, Mr. Balfour applies throughout his volume the term 'Naturalism.' "Agnosticism, Positivism, Empiricism," he says, "have all been used more or less correctly to describe this scheme of thought, though in the following pages, for reasons with which it is not necessary to trouble the reader, the term which I shall commonly employ is Naturalism." This passage and the usage it indicates have called forth emphatic disclaimers from the patrons or representatives of the views which are here practically identified. Each objects to be identified with any of the

others, and they all disclaim responsibility for the system of doctrines attributed to them in common. Professor Huxley, not unnaturally jealous for the honor of the term which he invented, objected "to making Agnosticism the scapegoat on whose head the philosophic sins of the companions with whom it is improperly associated may be conveniently piled up," while Mr. Frederic Harrison, as a Positivist, is still more wroth to find himself identified with the Agnostics, against whom he has so often gone forth to war in the Reviews. "The passage just quoted," he says, "is a coagulated clot of confusion and misstatement" — from which it is easy to see that Mr. Harrison is very angry indeed. Professor Wallace, on the other hand, though himself accepting in the main an Idealism of the Hegelian type, puts a lance in rest for Naturalism, which he seems to think has been hardly treated in being identified with its own extreme consequences. "Its faults," he says, "spring from a creditable motive. It is the desire to be honest, to say only what you can prove, to require thorough continuity and consistency in the whole realm of accepted truths.¹ Naturalism was a reaction from the follies of Supernaturalism." "Naturalism," he says again, "was at the outset and in essence a negation, not of the supernatural in general, but of a supernatural conceived as incoherent, arbitrary, and chaotic ; a protest against a conception which separated God from the world, as a potter from his clay, against the *ignava ratio* which took customary sequences of events as needing no explanation, and looked for special revelation from portents and wonders."²

¹ I cannot help remarking the striking similarity between this account of Naturalism and Professor Huxley's truly extraordinary definition of Agnosticism as consisting essentially "in the application of a single principle, which is the fundamental axiom of modern science. Positively, this principle may be thus expressed : in matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively : in matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable." On this showing, we should all desire with one accord to take service under the Agnostic flag, for Agnosticism, so defined, is another name for intellectual honesty. Similarly, on Professor Wallace's showing, no self-respecting person would permit himself to be called anything but a Naturalist.

² These quotations are from an article by Professor Wallace in the *Fortnightly Review* for April, 1895.

Understanding Supernaturalism in this sense, Professor Wallace regrets "that some recognition of the inner aims of Rationalism and Naturalism is not vouchsafed," and he would evidently prefer to rehabilitate the term Naturalism and follow that banner, rather than be suspected of any complicity with a discredited Supernaturalism. To this Mr. Balfour might easily retort that his purpose was not an historical review of the progress of opinion, but an attempt to deal directly with current ways of looking at the universe, using terms as nearly as possible in the sense which is most general in philosophic usage, and which they tend to bear in the vocabulary of educated people. And although Naturalism, as a matter of etymology and history, may take its rise as merely the denial of an external and arbitrary Supernaturalism, I think there can be no reasonable doubt that the name has acquired within the present century the signification which Mr. Balfour gives it, and that it has, indeed, of late been gradually supplanting other terms as the most fitting designation for the system of beliefs in question. Naturalism, in accepted phraseology, is a name applicable to any system which, as Mr. Balfour expresses it, finds the metaphysical or permanent reality of the universe in "the world which is revealed to us through perception and which is the subject-matter of the Natural Sciences." Naturalism is, therefore, practically identical with Materialism, though it may not pretend to explain the origin of the phenomena of consciousness from matter in motion, but may content itself in that regard with a doctrine of concomitance. In any case, the fundamental explanation — the central fact — of the universe is to be found, according to the theory, not in the phenomena of consciousness with their rational and ethical implications, but in the mechanical system of causes and effects of which consciousness seems to be the outcome or accompaniment. If that is so, any attempt to re-define Naturalism in such a way that absolute Idealism might reasonably be included under it, could only result in still further confusing the issues. The 'New Naturalism,' of which Professor Wallace constitutes himself the champion, would have, as he says, "to repair the

defects of the Old." But when repairs are so extensive as to alter the whole structure and outlook of the building, the question as to the identity of the edifice becomes a point of casuistry. Naturalism, in ordinary usage, is the antithesis not merely of the Supernaturalism which finds its support in supposed divine 'interference,' but also of every spiritual or idealistic theory of the universe. The wide influence of Mr. Balfour's book must have largely contributed to stereotype this use of the term; and, from the point of view of philosophical terminology, I cannot regard this as other than a fortunate result.

As a standing designation, it is distinctly preferable in point of accuracy to any of the terms which Mr. Balfour mentions as currently, but somewhat loosely, in use as synonyms. The absence of God and immortality from the Positivist scheme may well seem to the ordinary man to leave no practical difference between that doctrine and the theory of Naturalism. Yet, from a philosophical point of view, the difference is not unimportant. Though in its denials Positivism makes common cause with Naturalism, its constructive doctrine is borrowed from Idealism, or, if you like, from Christianity. In the stress which Positivism lays upon man, even to the extent of calling itself the religion of Humanity, Positivism echoes the thought of Pascal, that man — the dying reed — is greater than the universe by which he dies, that there is no common measure for the immensities of the physical universe and the spring of love, of thought, of reverence that wells in a human heart. To this Positivism owes its vitality, for the germ of the higher religions is this sense of the true infinite, the truly adorable, as revealed in man alone. "Comtianism," Dr. Hutchison Stirling has aptly said, "bears to Hegelianism a relation very similar to that of Mahometanism to Christianity" (Schwegler, p. 464). If we generalize the statement, we may, I think, recognize in Positivism an idealism *manqué* — an idealism with strange defects and inconsistencies — but still a doctrine in spirit and intention widely removed from mere Materialism. It is well, therefore, not to ignore this difference, but to continue to use

the term in a narrower and specific sense, as applicable to the different sects which appeal to Comte as their founder and claim to represent the Religion of Humanity.

Naturalism seems also more accurately descriptive than Agnosticism; for the theory in question is essentially a negative dogmatism, whereas Agnosticism, according to its etymology and according to the intention of the inventor of the term, is meant to convey only an expression of ignorance, a balance of the intellect, a refusal to pronounce upon ultimate problems either in one sense or in another. "A plague on both your houses" is, in effect, the language held by Professor Huxley to the partisans of Idealism and Materialism alike, in his well-known essay "On the Physical Basis of Life," in the essay "On Descartes," and in many other places. "The materialistic position that there is nothing in the world but matter, force, and necessity is as utterly devoid of justification as the most baseless of theological dogmas. The fundamental doctrines of Materialism, like those of Spiritualism and most other 'isms,' lie outside the limits of philosophical enquiry, and David Hume's great service to humanity is his irrefragable demonstration of what these limits are" (*Collected Essays*, I, p. 162). No doubt it is difficult constantly to keep oneself correctly balanced upon the razor-edge of agnostic orthodoxy. Professor Huxley tells us that "the further Science advances the more extensively and consistently will all the phenomena of Nature be represented by materialistic formulae and symbols"; and though he enters his protest against the error of mistaking the symbols for real entities, he admits, in doing so, that it is a mistake only too easy to fall into. The Agnostic, like David Hume, who is here invoked as patron of the creed, is apt to reserve his denials for 'divinity or school metaphysics,' while he views with something like equanimity the materialistic conclusions drawn from the advance of science. He is certain that he knows nothing of spiritual realities or agents; theoretically he should be equally certain of his ignorance of reality or agency in the case of natural phenomena. But, as he is constantly occupied with the latter, his hand becomes subdued to

what it works in. As man, moreover, is not a creature of pure reason alone, the senses assert their imperious sway over his practical beliefs, and his position becomes indistinguishable from Materialism pure and simple. Still, in spite of the fatal facility with which the one may glide into the other, we have in strictness no more right to identify the two, than a naturalist would have to deny the difference between two species because of the existence of intermediate forms in which they continuously approach one another. Definition in such cases must be by type. The typical Agnostic, like Huxley, is clearly distinguished from the typical Materialist. It would be an unjustifiable and quite unnecessary removal of landmarks, therefore, to use the two terms indiscriminately. No one in these days will allow that he is a Materialist; but Naturalism supplies exactly the term needed to enable us to surmount this verbal difficulty, while Agnosticism may be conveniently retained to designate the quasi-sceptical position which it etymologically suggests.¹

The only legitimate objection to this use of the term Naturalism is that urged by Professor Wallace. Naturalism, in a certain context, appears as the antithesis of Supernaturalism, and he who attacks Naturalism may accordingly be supposed to do so in the interest of 'miracles' and other 'supernatural' adjuncts of theology. Some parts of the discussion in Mr. Balfour's concluding chapters certainly seem to favor this view of his argument. But there are others which suggest a larger interpretation, as where he expressly discards what he calls "the common division between 'natural' and 'supernatural.'" "We cannot consent," he proceeds, "to see the 'preferential working of Divine Power' only in those religious manifestations which refuse to accommodate themselves to our conception (whatever that may be) of the strictly 'natural' order of the world; nor can we deny a Divine origin to those aspects of religious development which natural laws seem competent to

¹ Empiricism may be disregarded in this connection as a term which is no longer much in popular use. It tends to become restricted to the bloodless controversies of the schools, and even there it suggests, perhaps, a more or less obsolete formulation of the issues.

explain. The familiar distinction, indeed, between 'natural' and 'supernatural' coincides neither with that between natural and spiritual, nor with that between 'preferential action' and 'non-preferential,' nor with that between phenomenal and noumenal. It is perhaps less important than is sometimes supposed." Quite in keeping with this is the fine passage which follows on Inspiration, as "limited to no age, to no country, no people" (pp. 330-1).

But whatever Mr. Balfour's personal attitude may be towards the supernatural in the ordinary theological sense of that word (and that is a matter which does not concern us here), it is sufficiently plain that this is not the kernel of the argument. Even when he comes to deal with the central article of the Christian faith, it is not on the extra-naturalness of certain facts that the emphasis is laid, but upon the adaptation of the doctrine to the needs of man — upon what might be called, therefore, in the highest sense its 'naturalness.' The antithesis which runs through the volume and which must impress itself upon any candid reader, is not that between the natural and a so-called supernatural, but between the natural and the spiritual, between nature, as 'revealed to us through perception,' and that higher nature in nature which makes us men and gives us an earnest of the Divine. This antithesis also has the sanction of usage on its side. Both in theological and in philosophical writing the natural and the spiritual are as currently and intelligibly opposed to one another as the natural and the supernatural. The moral world of persons is constantly contrasted with the natural world of things. What other interpretation is to be put upon Leibnitz's 'Kingdom of Nature and Kingdom of Grace,' upon Kant's opposition of 'the Sensible and the Intelligible World'? "Nature," says Jacobi, "conceals God. Man reveals God." "Man Supernatural" is the title chosen by Professor Campbell Fraser for one of his recent Gifford Lectures. "As a merely sentient being, man is wholly, or almost wholly, an event in the orderly natural system. In his moral acts, man appears to exemplify that final principle on which natural order ultimately depends." "Nature," says

Green, concluding his long argument for a spiritual principle, "implies a principle which is non-natural" (*Proleg.*, p. 56). I quote these prominent expressions of widely different thinkers, not because I regard them all as equally sound, or any of them perhaps as beyond criticism, but simply to prove how widely current is the narrower sense of 'Nature' which is embodied in Mr. Balfour's use of Naturalism. In not one of the passages quoted is there the least suggestion of the supernatural in the mechanical and external sense of popular theology. The contrast is substantially between the material and the ideal, the natural and the spiritual. If we turn to the histories of philosophy and their classifications of philosophical doctrine, we find also that the usage is no innovation. When Schwegler applies that term to the doctrine of Democritus, when Ueberweg uses it as an equivalent to Materialism in his account of the French Encyclopaedists, and describes in the same way the transformation which the Hegelian system underwent at the hands of Feuerbach, both apparently appeal to accepted usage. No apology is offered for the introduction of the term, nor does the reader feel that any explanation is required of a terminology so appropriate. The conjecture is permissible that Mr. Balfour's usage would also have been accepted without cavil, but for the sub-title of the volume which seems to make the whole discussion ancillary to the study of theology. The air of England is charged with ecclesiasticism, and this was sufficient to create an inveterate prejudice in many minds, and to rouse in many more the suspicion of an *arrière pensée*. For there are many, unfortunately, who are more jealous of the encroachments of the supernatural than alive to the conservation of the spiritual truths of which it has been the vehicle.

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